



# Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

*Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship*

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## Opening Address

**Revd Dr Olav Fykse Tveit**

Mr President, Your Eminences, your Excellencies,

Presiding Bishop of the ELCT, Bishop Fredrick Shoo, church leaders from the Christian Council of Tanzania,

Moderator of the WCC central committee, Dr Agnes Abuom, Moderator of the CWME, Metropolitan Geevarghese Coorilos,

Dear participants, dear sisters and brothers gathered as pilgrims in God's mission here in Arusha, Tanzania,

To address you at the beginning of the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism is a special honour. These events are milestones in modern church history. You are all gathered here by the invitation from the World Council of Churches, to discern together where the mission of the church is going in our time.

It is an honour also to have you here, representing churches, ecumenical partners, mission agencies. Some of you are involved in education for the next generations of servants and leaders of the churches in the GETI programme. Some of you are here to analyze and communicate what is happening in your context of mission. We are many here, with different tasks as church leaders, students, pastors, missionaries, deacons and theologians. It is an honour as well to be here in Arusha, as guests of this beautiful country and of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania.

It is our privilege to call together this conference in the year of the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the World Council of Churches. Care for the mission of the church has always been driving force behind the ecumenical movement, toward our common witness and service, and therefore also toward new insights and new commitments. In the WCC, which also included the International Missionary Council since the 3<sup>rd</sup> Assembly in New Delhi in 1961, the call to be one has always been inspired by the call to mission. You are participating in this anniversary by showing how the churches and their partners continue to commit themselves to be together in God's mission and in the discernment of what that means in 2018 and in the years to come. We have much to learn from the important and sometimes difficult discussions of the past that can inform our work in the WCC and its Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. The call to meet here is supported by costly assets from our shared legacy.

As we gather here in Arusha, we bring a heightened awareness of our situation and landscape. We are well aware of the rich fruits of the work of the missionary movement. I personally know some of them and their great contribution to this church and this country. We are also well aware how important it has been to change the paradigm (as the missiologists call the ideas and patterns of mission) to a shared and mutually accountable relationship in mission. We are also well aware how significant the life of the church in this part of the world is for the whole *oikoumene*, the whole fellowship of churches in the WCC and

beyond, as an expression of the vitality of the church and its witness to Jesus Christ in our time. We are also well aware here in this context of Africa how important it is to acknowledge that our witness and service always happen in a multi-religious and multi-cultural world. Furthermore, we are well aware that the mission of the church must work for a fair and just distribution of the resources of the world and participate in *diakonia* to address the injustices and the needs of people in our world today – whatever faith they hold and whatever context they live in. We are also, lastly, becoming well aware here that the mission of the church must contribute to the just peace that people require in all parts of the world, and particularly those who are living in conflict areas or have had to leave their homes as refugees.

In our reflections these days about where the Spirit is moving us as disciples of Jesus Christ today and tomorrow, we see ourselves in a world in desperate need of peaceful and just patterns of living together as one humanity in the one, vulnerable creation of God. Our common ministry in ecumenical mission and ecumenical *diakonia* is needed more than ever.

Like you, I am delighted that we now are here to start the work of this conference. We can thank the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism for their hard work to prepare this event – together with our colleagues in the WCC and the hosts here in Arusha.

Yet it is something more than an honour and a joy to stand here and address you. This is also an awesome moment, when we stand not only before one another but also before the triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and ask for guidance in the call given to us. So much is at stake, and it is important that we from the very beginning pray that the Holy Spirit will guide our reflections and conclusions.

Reflection on the mission of the church is not just about interesting and relevant methods of work, and about analyzing new trends in the world important for strategizing mission work. The mission of the church is about life and death. The mission of the church is about salvation, liberation, and giving hope - through sharing the most costly and precious in this world: The love of God. It is the ministry of reconciliation, through which we are called to share the gift of God's reconciliation of the broken and sinful – the gift we all need. It is about how the Gospel can have an impact on the life of every human being, how the ministry of reconciliation with God and with one another and with all creation can happen today and tomorrow – again and again. The future of the mission of the church is at stake, as we are here to reflect on its most basic rationale and purpose: To be church for others.

We know that changes and transformation happen all the time in this world. But in which direction are the transformations going? You are here to discern what kind of transformation God is calling us to promote. How is the Holy Spirit today moving us into the future God wants for the world? We are not just talking among ourselves, as specialists in ecumenism and mission and evangelism. We are talking with one another as representatives of the churches and the people in the churches – who in turn represent the many dimensions of the one humanity. We are talking to one another as disciples, called by Christ to move in the Spirit, not to discuss our own business, and definitely not our own interests, but the future of the mission of God in this world, in the life of this humanity, and in creation.

All this makes me feel awed, and a great sense of humility, as we open this conference. Who am I in this momentum, and who are we to do so?

It is an historical wind blowing today filled with the legacy of the world mission conferences, of the new mission statement *Together towards Life*, of the anniversary of the WCC, and of the new momentum for sharing widely in the same mission of God. This is the wind of the Spirit, blowing through the ecumenical movement and moving us forward with signs of spring – life returning again but in new ways – through challenges and also facing adverse and cold winds.

It is not only today when we have this theme that the Spirit is moving us forward. There is no church, no mission of the church, no ecumenical movement, no mission movement, without the movement of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is working in the whole of creation and in the church. Ecumenical dialogues and sharing have helped all of us to recognize this multiple dimension of the work of God's Spirit, and it is a hallmark of the new mission statement. It is the same Spirit that instils life in creation and in the church. It is in this wider perspective we fully and truly can recognize the work of the Spirit in the church and in our mission.

The mission in which we are involved is not for protection of ourselves or what we have or where we are and how it used to be. Nor is the purpose of mission to ignore the presence of the local – and ordinary – church, with its gifts and credibility in mission and *diakonia*. We should not think that to be part of God's mission is by definition to focus on everything else and everywhere else than where God has actually placed us in this world. There is always a movement in mission. Sometimes this movement means many kilometres, crossing borders and oceans. But sometimes this movement is to move our and others' hearts and actions right where we are – to those who need us here and now.

It is also in this perspective that we reflect here that our participation in mission is part of being together on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. This is the overall perspective of the work of the World Council of Churches in this period after the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Busan. You are all invited to join this pilgrimage, which we pursue in all our programmatic work. Some of it is focused on how mutual sharing and accompaniment can be expressed through our visits to the many wounds and to the burning places where the ministry of reconciliation and the thirst for justice and righteousness are particularly strong.

One of the great risks we have when we talk about transformation is becoming superficial in the way we understand it. We should not fall in the trap of looking only at how much we have improved results, more effective evangelism, higher attendance in our meetings, more goodwill, more budgets, etc. That is not transformation in its fundamental sense. We are called to a God-given and God-oriented transformation. That means transformation for the common good and for everybody that God cares about. That means a focus on the whole human being created in the image of God. That means transformation to the better for all of us in our diversity and with our differences. That means transformation in all places – leaving no one behind (as the UN motto for the Sustainable Development Goals says and which we share also as a vision for the transformation given by God). We have a responsibility for the whole of creation. The world in which we are called to be disciples is this world – as it is, as a local home and a global home – the only one we have.

The mission of God is something that the Spirit is driving. That does not mean that we are not involved or that we shall not do it ourselves. To the contrary. It does not mean that it only happens in big waves or in big trends that are analyzed by CNN or by well-educated missiologists and church historians. The movement of the Spirit is the transformation of hearts. It means change in our relationships. It is a transformation that leads to justice and peace. It is the transformation of the visible signs of the kingdom of God.

The focus on being together in a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace – working, praying and walking together, is a focus of movement in faith, in expectation, in openness, in humility – with a sense for where justice and peace, the values of the kingdom of God are under pressure and must find new expressions. This is a trend, a momentum, now in the one ecumenical movement and in the World Council of Churches – and this conference is a significant expression of exactly that.

Another great sign of the movement of the Spirit is that it opens our hearts and our eyes and our ears so that the others matter more than ourselves. The expression “transforming discipleship” has a double

meaning – in most languages – if it can be translated as a noun. It is the transformation of the world and the church that true discipleship leads to. And it is the transformation of the disciples themselves.

The order of these factors is not arbitrary. The mission of God in following Jesus Christ and his example is always pointing to the other, to those who are around us. The calling is about focusing on them – not us. If we first of all and most of all are occupied with ourselves, and what we shall change in our own lives - and we could add: our own communities and churches - we definitely have a lot to do. But the primary focus on ourselves can be exactly the barrier for the real transformation we should contribute to. The liberation of and creative support for the life of others is also what liberates us.

We have to be ourselves, as God created us, and affirming one another as such. This is how we become part of God's transformation. Not the other way around. There is something wrong in our faith and our love to God if we are so preoccupied with ourselves. The modern mission movement has had a very strong focus on the personal calling, commitment, and sacrifice. The higher calling, the greater sacrifice; the more you sacrifice, the stronger your commitment. I know that there are logical and personal, even spiritual connections in this respect. The history of mission gives us endless examples of that. You do not do something that includes sacrifices if you don't believe it is important and significant – and in this regard important for the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, there have been many stories about children who had to pay the sacrifice for their parents' choices, about colleagues and particularly spouses that have to pay high prices for the very personal calling many believe that they have.

When we focus on the calling, the transformation that God is seeking in this world, we don't become robots or fanatics. We are becoming the people God has created for the mission of God to be fulfilled in the world.

Disciples are not called to be alone. First and foremost, all Christian disciples are called to follow Jesus Christ. It is a case of learning, of imitation of Jesus, that became the model of discipleship – that requires a relationship of mutual attention and sharing. This is expressed in the very significant text that most often connects the call to mission and unity, John 17:

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may believe that you have sent me and loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:22-23)

The church following Jesus Christ is always together – because we are only church through this unity in the triune God. We are called together and we respond together.

How to find the way the Spirit moves? The ecumenical experience has taught us: By listening to the Word of God together and learning from one another. There is no way to say that I alone or we alone know the way the wind is blowing. Nobody knows where the wind is blowing, Jesus says (John 3). We all should have a reverence for the mystery in our faith and in our movement.

It is this solidarity in the Spirit, and in the imperative of learning from those at the margins, that so radically informs the vision of mission and evangelism in *Together towards Life* and that characterizes ecumenical engagement today.

It is only in sharing what the Spirit is doing and has done in our churches and communities and in our encounters with others that makes us able to discern this together. The practice of dialogue and the acknowledgment of mutual accountability have been developed as ecumenical tools that have brought many precious gifts to the fellowship of the WCC. These are among the costly pieces of our legacy that have changed the churches, the way we work in mission, the way we understand discipleship, the way we

perceive what is a proper transformation. We have to be very sensitive and more accountable to our gospel values as we give our Christian witness and contributions in a multi-religious world.

Yet we should not at all take for granted or simply assume that we share the visions for what discipleship and mission are today. We do so in a wide circle today, and we give thanks to God today for this inspiring and encouraging reality. We do have a shared conviction that we must focus not on ourselves, but on the way we shall walk together, the work we shall do together, and the way we shall pray together. There is a growing common understanding of trying to not be so focused on ourselves, or our institutions, but on the calling we share, the needs of others, the tasks that are calling us every day in a world where the Gospel is urgently needed - as ever before.

This conference is a sign of where we have been led by the Spirit. Another important sign is the upcoming visit in June of Pope Francis to the WCC. It is a sign of how we are together in mission in our time. “Walking – praying – moving together” is the motto for this apostolic mission of the Holy Father. The same focus has been in the recent visits of many church leaders to the WCC. We are together in mission and service – as we do together all that we can do together.

The WCC has always called and should always call the churches to visible unity by calling us back to the basis of unity. This shared understanding of mission means sharing the Gospel, our faith, and also the search for transformation toward justice and peace everywhere in the world where it is needed.

Let me end by sharing a vision of how this conference is and can be an expression of what we have done together and what we *are* together as churches in God’s mission. I believe that God is reminding us particularly in our time of what is the force driving the mission of church. It is the love of God, expressed in the love of Jesus Christ through his life, crucifixion and resurrection, bringing salvation and reconciliation to the world. We should be stamped by the words of the Apostle Paul: “The love of Christ urges us on” (2 Cor 5:14).

The movement of mission and the ecumenical movement are driven by one and only one power: The love of Christ. The love of Christ to become human, to be incarnate, to be one of us, to share the visions and the signs of the coming kingdom of God, to speak truth to all, particularly to the power of religion and government, to occupier, to all. His love expresses itself by taking anything and everything upon himself, so that the people might live. So that all of us might have hope.

The mission movement must be a vision of love to make ultimate sense. If this is done for the sake of the glory and power of its institutions, or for the dominance of churches in the world, it will fail in its calling.

Nothing but love can bring the transformation that is according to God’s will and that the world needs so desperately. The love that is driving us is the Spirit, who touches us and equips us to be the agents of transformation needed today – together with all peoples God has created to live together in this world. This world—in its pain, in its possibilities, in its redemptive promise—is our home. It is here that we bear witness and nurture signs of the coming reign of God.